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Authors
Babai, Reuven
Gigi, Ariela
Hendler, Talma
et al.

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The Role of Frontal Areas in Naming of Objects Pictured from Unusual Viewpoints

Ariela Gigi (Ariela.Gigi@sheba.health.gov.il)
Department of Behavioral Sciences, College of Judea and Samaria, Ariel 44837, Israel
The Joseph Sagol Neuroscience Center, Sheba Medical Center, Tel-Hashomer 52621, Israel

Reuven Babai
Department of Science Education, The Constantiner School of Education, Tel-Aviv University, Tel-Aviv 69978, Israel

Talma Hendler
The Functional Brain Imaging Unit, Whol Institute for Advanced Imaging, Sourasky Medical Center, Tel-Aviv 64239, Israel

Eytan Katzav
Department of Psychology, Tel-Aviv University, Tel-Aviv 69978, Israel

Background
Semantic memory is the basis on which we organize and understand our interaction with the world. This memory is known to be affected in normal aging, which manifests primarily in naming problems, probably because naming places a critical and heavy load on semantic processing. We designed a naming test to study the semantic memory decline in normal aging and to detect brain areas and activation patterns associated with object naming performance (Gigi, Babai, Katzav, Atkins, & Hendler, 2005).

Methodology
Naming Performance was studied behaviorally on 117 participants aged 20 to 75 years old. Cerebral activation patterns were studied using functional-MRI (fMRI) on 18 healthy participants. Nine young participants (aged 20-30) and nine old participants (aged 60-78).

The test included two types of pictured stimuli. One, common objects that were pictured from a conventional viewpoint (usual condition), and the other condition included common objects that were pictured form a non-conventional viewpoint (unusual condition). The stimuli were presented in a block-design fashion and the participants were asked to name the objects as fast and as accurate as they could. Correct responses and Reaction Time (RT) were measured in the behavioral study.

Results
In the usual condition the percent of correct responses was high and remained stable (93%-94%) across the ages 20 to 70. Decline in performance was only evident above 70 years of age. In the unusual condition the naming performance was significantly lower in all age groups (66% of correct responses in average). Moreover, age-related naming decline for this condition was evident already from 40 years of age. Reaction times, on the contrary, showed a consistent increase with age in the usual as well as in the unusual conditions.

Discussion
The brain patterns detected in the young population, suggests an important role of the PFC in naming of objects seen from unusual viewpoints. Since there is a loss of frontal grey matter with age, this might explain (at least in part) the observed age-decline in naming performance. Over activation of the hippocampal formation in the old population, during naming performance, might represent a compensatory attempt. This is in accordance with a recent study showing the contribution of the hippocampus to semantic processing of visual objects (Vannucci et al., 2003).

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References